

# Moldova

**BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR**

## International Religious Freedom Report 2009

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**October 26, 2009**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion. The law includes restrictions that at times inhibited the activities of some religious groups. The latest law on religion, which went into effect in 2007, in theory simplifies registration procedures and allows religious groups easier access to public places to hold religious events.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period. The Government registered one religious group (affiliated with a previously registered group), and continued to deny registration to certain groups attempting to gain legal status. In Transnistria, a separatist region not controlled by the Government, authorities generally respected the rights of registered groups but continued to deny registration to a number of minority religious groups and to harass their members. All references in this report, unless otherwise stated, are to areas controlled by the internationally recognized Government.

According to members of Jehovah's Witnesses, many societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice occurred, including in the separatist region of Transnistria.

The U.S. Embassy raised concerns at high levels of Government regarding the persistent registration difficulties faced by some religious groups. In February 2009 the U.S. Ambassador hosted the third annual gathering for leaders of religious groups to support the expansion of religious freedom in the country.

### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 13,000 square miles and a total population of 3.95 million, including 528,600 in the secessionist-controlled region of Transnistria.

The predominant religion is Orthodox Christian. According to various estimates, more than 90 percent of the population nominally belongs to either of two Orthodox denominations, Moldovan or Bessarabian.

According to the Government, the Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC), which is subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church, has 1,281 parishes, monasteries, seminaries, and other entities; the Bessarabian Orthodox Church (BOC), subordinate to the Romanian Orthodox Church, has 309 such entities; and the Old Rite Russian Orthodox Church (Old Believers) has 15 parishes. There was no information on the number of parishes or followers of the True Orthodox Church of Moldova (also known as the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad). Jehovah's Witnesses reported that they have 239 congregations, including 31 in the separatist

region of Transnistria. According to the Baptist World Alliance, the Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists of Moldova has 313 churches and 20,391 members. In November 2008 the European Baptist Federation stated that hundreds of indigenous missionaries are involved in establishing 40 new Baptist churches in the country.

Government figures also list 2,327 registered religious groups, in chronological order of date of registration, through June 11, 2008. The list does not distinguish between local parishes and denominations, or connect individual parishes to a parent denomination.

Adherents of other religious groups, constituting less than 10 percent of the population, include Roman Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, Jews, followers of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon (the Unification Church), Molokans (a Russian group), Messianic Jews, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and charismatic and evangelical Christian groups.

In Transnistria the largest religious organization is the MOC. Other groups include Roman Catholics, followers of Old Rite Orthodoxy, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical and charismatic Protestants, Jews, and Lutherans.

On March 31, 2009, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) granted registration to the Armenian Christian Apostolic Cult and one of its religious communities. The MOJ states that the Armenian Christian Apostolic Cult is different from the Armenian Apostolic Church, which was granted registration in 1995 and had two religious communities. Both organizations share the same address, but have different legal identities.

The MOJ did not consent to specify the number of registration requests received during the reporting period. However, the Embassy received reports from Muslim groups and from Falun Gong that the MOJ has refused numerous requests to register the groups.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law on religion, which went into effect in 2007, in theory simplifies registration procedures and allows religious groups easier access to public places to hold religious events. The law includes restrictions that at times inhibited the activities of some religious groups.

The law on religion affirms the role of the Orthodox Church in the country's history, simplifies registration procedures, and liberalizes the access of religious groups to public places, requiring only that the groups agree upon the place with local authorities in advance. All groups, whether registered or not, enjoy freedom to worship and reported having free access to public places for their activities. However, at the end of the reporting period, only one unregistered religious group, the Armenian Christian Apostolic Cult, obtained legal status through the new registration procedures. After responsibilities for religious registration were transferred from the State Services for Religious Affairs (SSRA) to the MOJ in October 2007, three Muslim groups attempted to register but were unsuccessful.

In passing the law on religion, Parliament did not address the Council of Europe's (COE) concerns, expressed in April 2007, which called for legislation to define clearly a group's right to register as a religious community and have access to remedy in the case of refusal. The COE also had urged Parliament to define

clearly the right of registration, including full legal personality, of all religious communities, including those with fewer than 100 members. In addition, the COE had recommended that Parliament clarify the conditions under which the MOJ might request the courts to prohibit activities of certain religious communities.

Registration gives religious groups legal status that allows them to own property, open bank accounts, and hire employees. Individual churches or branches of registered religious organizations are not required to register with the MOJ as long as they do not carry out legal transactions and receive donations as local legal entities. The parent organization must exercise authority in those domains for unregistered local branches. Unregistered groups may not own property, obtain construction permits for churches or seminaries, open bank accounts, hire employees, or obtain space in public cemeteries in their own names.

The procedures for registering a religious organization are the same for all groups. A religious organization must present to the MOJ a declaration of its exact name, fundamental principles of belief, organizational structure, scope of activities, sources of finance, and rights and obligations of membership. The MOJ is required by law to register the religious organization within 15 days, provided that the registration request is made according to law. At the request of the MOJ, a court can suspend the registered status of a religious organization for 12 months if it "carries out activities that harm the Constitution or laws" or "affects state security, public order, [or] the life and security of the people."

The law gives freedom to local religious communities to change their denominational affiliation or dissolve themselves. All religious groups are allowed to hold services at state facilities, including orphanages, hospitals, schools, and military and police institutions, upon request from persons in such institutions and provided they get the approval of the institution's administration.

The law permits missionaries to sign work contracts with religious organizations, which in theory should ease the process to obtain residency permits. The law does not require such work contracts. However, the Bureau for Migration and Asylum (a part of the Ministry of Interior), in charge of temporary residency permits, required religious groups to issue work contracts to missionary employees that indicate their salaries. This requirement was imposed even when missionaries donated their services or were sponsored and paid by overseas churches. By requiring work permits, the Bureau for Migration and Asylum and the National Agency for the Occupation of the Workforce, which grants the work permits, in effect did not allow foreigners to work as unpaid volunteers.

Religious freedom rights enshrined in the previous religion law are preserved in the new law. It guarantees freedom of conscience and religion, permits alternative service for conscientious objectors to military duties, protects the confidentiality of statements made to a priest in the confessional, and allows denominations to establish associations and foundations.

Additions to the law that could be used to restrict religious freedom include: the requirement of at least 100 citizen founders to register a religious organization (some religious group members object to providing their official details in the document, citing an article in the law that "any request to indicate religious affiliation in official documents is illegal"); a more detailed definition of "abusive proselytism" (including "psychological manipulation or a variety of subliminal techniques"); and the recognition by the state of the "exceptional importance and fundamental role of the Christian Orthodox religion, particularly that of the Moldovan Orthodox Church, in the life, history, and culture of the people of the Republic of Moldova."

A new Contraventions' Code (formerly known as the Code of Administrative Offences) was adopted on October 24, 2008, published on January 16, 2009, and entered into force on May 31, 2009. Article 54 of the

Code provides for various fines from 700 to 4,000 lei (\$63 to \$360) for violating religious freedom. It also provides for expulsion of foreign religious believers who hold religious activity in public places, without first notifying the mayor's office. However, the article conflicts with European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) rulings. Therefore, on February 9, 2009, the Permanent Governmental Commission established in September 2008 to implement ECHR decisions urged the Ministry of Interior (MOI), Prosecutor General Office (PGO), and Supreme Court of Justice to take the necessary steps in order to prevent expulsion of foreign religious believers who violate article 54. As a result, on February 23, 2009, the MOI issued an order stating that article 54 was not to be applied. At the time this report was written, there was no information indicating that article 54 sanctions had been applied.

Moldovan law provides for conscientious objection to military service. Transnistrian law has no provisions for alternative service. According to Article 325 of the Transnistrian Criminal Code, those who avoid or evade military service may be sentenced to fines from 4,427 to 10,710 rubles (\$527 to \$1,275) or imprisonment for up to two years.

There is no state religion; however, the MOC receives favored treatment from the Government. The Metropolitan of Chisinau and all Moldova holds a diplomatic passport. The Metropolitan participates as the sole religious figure in some national celebrations and appears regularly on the front pages of newspapers that support the Government. Progovernment television channels regularly show visits of high government officials to MOC churches and monasteries. Institutions such as state schools and hospitals display Orthodox icons on their walls.

The Government publicly supported fundraising for the repair and restoration of the monasteries at Capriana and Curchi. On August 28, 2008, President Voronin participated in the dedication of the Capriana Monastery, and praised the citizens and "national and international economic agents" which raised approximately \$8 million (82 million lei) for the reconstruction. On November 21, 2008, the President declared in a public speech that the Curchi Monastery was a "true pilgrimage site for the Moldovan people," and noted that the reconstruction and repair of monasteries were "examples of cooperation between society, the Government, and the church."

On February 22, during the election campaign, President Voronin spoke to clergy at Condrita Monastery and stated that the Party of Communists (PCRM) was the only party that helped the church. Declaring that "Jesus Christ was the first communist," he added that the PCRM was the same as the MOC, and all other parties were the same as the BOC. He asked priests to vote for him as a person "who did a great deal for the church," even if they could not openly support the PCRM.

In contrast to the Roman Catholic Church, which urged its priests to encourage parishioners to study party platforms and participate in April 5 parliamentary elections, the MOC made no such statement, declaring that the church is "a holy place exclusively for prayer." Two prominent Baptists ran as candidates for Parliament, representing the Liberal Democratic and Christian Democratic parties, without drawing negative comment for their religious affiliation.

The Government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Orthodox Christmas, Orthodox Easter, Easter Monday, and Memorial Easter (a commemoration of the dead).

Foreign missionaries may remain in the country for 90 days on a tourist visa. Foreign religious workers must register with, and receive documentation from, the National Agency for the Occupation of the Work Force, the Bureau for Migration and Asylum, and the Ministry of Informational Development.

According to the law on education, "moral and spiritual instruction" is mandatory for primary school students and optional for secondary school and university students. Some schools offer religion courses, but enrollment depends on parental request and the availability of funds.

Two public schools and a kindergarten are theoretically open only to Jewish students; in practice, children adhering to other religions also attend. In Chisinau one kindergarten has a special "Jewish group." Jewish students are not restricted to these schools.

On November 19, 2008, a new law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations was adopted by the Supreme Soviet in the separatist region of Transnistria, but was vetoed by the region's leader, Igor Smirnov. The veto was overridden on February 4, 2009, by the Supreme Soviet. For the first time, the law provides for legal registration of religious organizations. The Office of the Commissioner for Religious Affairs was abolished and the registration authority passed to the Transnistrian "Ministry" of Justice.

The new Transnistrian law affirms the role of the Orthodox Church in the region's history. All religions, whether registered or not, enjoy freedom to worship, and foreign citizens share in those rights.

However, the Transnistrian law also provides for restrictions of the right to freedom of conscience and religion, if this is necessary to protect the constitutional order, morality, health, citizens' rights and interests, or state defense and security.

Religious organizations are not allowed to participate in elections, political party activity or support nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) involved in elections of any kind.

Religious education may be offered in Transnistria, but only if parents and guardians take into consideration the child's rights to freedom of conscience. Extracurricular religious education in public and private schools is allowed if parents and guardians request it, and the child accepts it.

In order to receive legal registration in Transnistria, a local religious organization must have at least 10 members (aged 18 and above) with permanent residence in the region, and be able to confirm its existence for at least 10 years in the region. A local religious organization can also be registered as part of a centralized religious organization, which must consist of at least three local religious organizations. The religious organization must inform the registration authority about intentions to extend its activity on a yearly basis.

To receive Transnistrian official registration, a religious organization must provide the following documents: registration request, the list of founders with all personal details, the statute of the religious organization, the minutes from the constituent assembly, proof of activity for 10 years or more, basic religious doctrine, contact details of the governing body of the religious organization, and an official tax receipt. The Transnistrian "Ministry" of Justice has to make a decision on granting the registration. If the "Ministry" decides to conduct a "religious assessment," the registration can be postponed for up to six months. These assessment procedures are established by the "President" of Transnistria.

The Transnistrian law also provides for the activity and registration of foreign religious missions. However, it stipulates that the foreign religious organization cannot pursue religious activity, and does not enjoy the status of a religious organization, unless it is officially registered. The registration authority (the Transnistrian "Ministry" of Justice) oversees the religion's statute, its aims, and activity. Religious organizations can be liquidated upon their own decision or upon a Transnistrian court's decision. The prosecutor's office oversees the implementation of the legislation on religious freedom. The prosecutor's office and/or the region's executive, city, or district authorities can request liquidation, suspension, or ban of a religious organization in the court.

The Transnistrian law allows the use of homes and apartments to hold religious services. However, it does not allow the use of homes and apartments as accommodation (residence) for religious organizations. Religious services/rituals are also allowed in public places such as hospitals, clinics, orphanages, geriatric homes, and prisons, upon the request of religious organizations. Religious organizations can freely produce, publish, import, and export religious printing, audio and video, and other religious items. Article 28 imposes criminal, administrative, and other liabilities on those who violate the religious freedom legislation, but does not give details.

Although the Transnistrian law went into effect in March 2009 (after the veto was overridden), its provisions requested religious organizations to comply with it by December 31, 2008; otherwise, they would face liquidation. At the time this report was written, no consequences of failure to register had occurred.

The new Transnistrian law has no provisions that would permit alternative service for conscientious objection to military duties.

The provisions of the Transnistrian law are affected by the fact that the head of the Office of the Commissioner for Religious Affairs, which was abolished under the new law, was appointed as special advisor for religious affairs to "President" Smirnov. Since the "President" supervises operational relations between the "Ministry" of Interior and the registration authority ("Ministry" of Justice), and advises on registration and liquidation of religious groups, the advisor has de facto power to delay or deny registration.

### **Restrictions on Religious Freedom**

The Moldovan Government continued to deny registration to some groups. The Pentecostal Church complained that registration requests for new congregations were hindered by MOJ insistence that all the local church founders sign the request, even though the founders had already signed the incorporation papers and designated a single representative to sign the registration request.

In June 2009 several foreign missionaries reported that authorities were preventing the opening of evangelical Christian summer camps.

On May 12, the ECHR ruled in favor of Moldovan citizen Talgat Masaev, who had been found guilty by a local court in 2004 of practicing a religion not recognized by the state, after police entered the private residence where he and other Muslims were praying, and dispersed the group. Masaev appealed the sentence and the fine at an appellate court, which dismissed his application without comment, and did not invite him to attend the hearing.

The ECHR ruled that the state should not have punished members of an unregistered religious denomination for praying or otherwise manifesting their religious beliefs. Such actions by the state, the court ruled, amount to the exclusion of minority beliefs not formally registered by the state, and a dictation by the state regarding what persons could believe. The ECHR also ruled that Masaev, because he was not invited to the appellate court, had been denied an effective remedy to his complaint.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported numerous cases of religious restriction of their activity, including eight cases of prosecution for objection to military service in Transnistria. In Transnistria, only two of more than 30 Jehovah's Witnesses' congregations--those in Tiraspol and Ribnita--had legal status at the end of the reporting period. There were 24 reports of restrictions of Jehovah's Witnesses' religious activity in Transnistria. Local town/village authorities refuse to issue proof of existence/activity of the religious

community in the region, which is required to get registration under the new law. Local authorities sought to cancel the fiscal code (necessary for financial transactions) for Jehovah's Witnesses, confiscated religious literature and the registration certificate of the group in Ribnita, and interfered with a memorial celebration in the village of Parcani. Court victories won by Jehovah's Witnesses were regularly overturned and new trials ordered.

Transnistrian authorities are attacking the legal status of Jehovah's Witnesses on several fronts by (1) challenging the remaining 1994 registration for Tiraspol; (2) refusing to accredit the "leaders" of the Tiraspol community and the Ribnita community; (3) refusing to register new charters for Jehovah's Witnesses in Tiraspol, Ribnita, Grigoriopol and Tighina; (4) seeking to cancel the fiscal code for Jehovah's Witnesses; (5) confiscating religious literature; (6) creating difficulties connected to the use of the Kingdom Hall in Ribnita; (7) illegally confiscating the Registration Certificate of the Ribnita community; (8) interfering with the memorial celebration in Parcani; (9) persecuting members because of their stand on neutrality, and (10) attempting to liquidate both the Tiraspol and the Ribnita communities. Court cases are prolonged by local legal authorities.

Transnistrian authorities continued to prosecute members of Jehovah's Witnesses for their conscientious objection to military service. Consequently, between 1995 and 2008, more than 30 Jehovah's Witnesses have been prosecuted because of their conscientious objection to military service for religious reasons. Some individuals have been sentenced to a one-year prison term to be served on probation and others have been fined an amount equivalent to \$450 to \$1,000. The cases of the plaintiffs were frequently slowed by the absence of judges or prosecution representatives on the dates scheduled for hearings.

On November 11, 2008, Oleg Mundrescul enrolled in alternative service in accordance with Moldovan law. Transnistrian authorities accepted the alternative service in accordance with Article 23 of the Transnistrian Law on military service, which exempts from recruitment in peacetime all "citizens" who perform military or alternative military service in another "state."

On November 28, 2008, Igor Gnilenko was fined \$565 (5,000 TNR rubles) for refusing military service on religious grounds. His case remained under appeal at the end of the reporting period.

On February 12, 2009, the Transnistrian Supreme Court rejected the appeal of Nicolai Procopciuc, who had been protesting since 2007 against his notification to report for military service, on the grounds of religious convictions. In December 2004 Procopciuc was convicted by the Bender City Court for conscientious objection to military service and was fined an amount equivalent to \$450.

On February 12, 2009, the Transnistrian Supreme Court rejected the appeal of Ivan Coroliov, who had been protesting since June 04, 2008 against his notification to report for military service, on the grounds of religious convictions. On October 9, 2008 the TNR Supreme Court judge rejected the motion and sentenced Coroliov to one year in prison with a suspended sentence.

Religious communities, especially Protestants, complained of cumbersome bureaucratic procedures to obtain permission for foreign citizens to live and conduct religious work in the country. Applicants must have a total of 16 documents, including a medical certificate, a certificate confirming they have not committed crimes in their home country, a blood test stating that they are free of AIDS, and evidence of insurance. They then must apply to the National Agency for the Occupation of the Workforce for a work permit. That permit, if approved, is presented to the MOI's Department of Migration and Refugees in order to receive the migration certificate. If the application is approved, the applicant must present the work permit and the migration

certificate to the Ministry of Informational Development, which issues the residence permit, with a validity not exceeding one year. Only registered religious organizations may apply for such permission. When extending the residency permit validity, the same procedure must be followed, but with the additional requirement of presenting a criminal record certificate confirming that the applicant has not committed crimes in the country during previous stays.

On March 3, 2009, the Transnistrian Supreme Court rejected the complaints of Jehovah's Witnesses who had requested authorities to investigate a March 2008 incident in which the Parcani economic crimes unit advised them not to hold an annual religious observance, and 40 demonstrators gathered at the house of the Jehovah's Witnesses' leader, holding signs that criticized Jehovah's Witnesses as a dangerous sect.

On April 11, 2009, two Romanian-citizen priests serving three BOC parishes in Cahul raion (district) were stopped at the Oancea-Cahul border crossing as they attempted to re-enter the country to conduct Easter services. Although the priests had residency permits and had served for many years, they were denied entry under provisions of new regulations requiring that Romanian citizens possess a visa and an invitation from the MOI.

On March 30, 2009, the Mayor of Mereni rejected a request for permission to build a Jehovah's Witnesses place of worship, despite the community's successful appeals of refusals to the level of the Supreme Court of Justice, and the November 2008 order of the Anenii Noi Bailiff's Office.

Transnistrian authorities continued to use a textbook at all school levels containing negative and defamatory allegations regarding Jehovah's Witnesses.

Property disputes between the MOC and BOC remained unresolved. Although the law provides for restitution of property confiscated during successive fascist and Soviet regimes to politically repressed or exiled persons, the provision does not apply to property confiscated from religious organizations or their constituent parts during successive Nazi and Soviet regimes. On March 19, 2009, the Council of Ministers of the Council of Europe concluded that the Government had fulfilled all its obligations towards the BOC. Local authorities can make arrangements with local parishes to return church properties; in practice these arrangements almost always benefit the MOC. Partly because the Government continued to refuse to return archives to the BOC that were confiscated during the Soviet years (1945-91), the BOC was unable to give an exact count of the churches that it could claim as former BOC properties.

At the end of the reporting period, the ECHR had not ruled on the Government's 2001 decision to make the BOC the successor to the pre-World War II Romanian Orthodox Church for purposes of all property ownership. The BOC complained that its access to documents proving its right to numerous properties was blocked. Likewise, the ECHR had made no decision regarding the October 2006 Floresti BOC parish petition regarding the ownership of a church that the MOC claimed as its property.

The Lutheran Church claimed properties, most of which were destroyed in World War II. For example, a 400-seat Lutheran church, on the site now occupied by the Presidency in Chisinau, was destroyed by the Soviets in the early 1960s. Government authorities used legal arguments to deny the claim by Lutheran officials and stated that properties would not be returned because there were not enough congregants to support their use.

### **Abuses of Religious Freedom**

For several days before Passover in April 2009, police and customs officials visited one of the Chisinau synagogues, claiming that they had a right to inspect a humanitarian assistance shipment of matzos and



kosher food for the upcoming holiday. Although the shipment had cleared customs at the border, the officials returned repeatedly, at one point with 17 officers, and randomly opened packages of food. Officials made no arrests and assessed no fines.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported numerous cases of religious abuses during the reporting period. On November 30, 2007, Mihai Beiu, mayor of the village of Gvozdova, assaulted Jehovah's Witnesses Victor Patrascu and Gheorghe Ciobanu. Beiu declared that he, the local Orthodox priest, and residents did not want Jehovah's Witnesses speaking about their religion in the village. He further threatened them with violence if they did not stop their activity. In July 2008, Victor Patrascu noted that Beiu had stopped his persecution and threats.

On September 27, 2007, Vitalie Zicu, the Orthodox priest in the village of Ustia, verbally attacked Jehovah's Witnesses Natalia Roscovan and Olesea Baltag, insulting and threatening them with violence if they did not stop their activities and leave the village. On October 12, 2007, a complaint was submitted to the Glodeni Regional Police Station. On January 16, 2008, a petition was submitted to the Glodeni Regional Prosecutor. On January 21, 2008, the Glodeni Regional Police Station stated that Zicu had been warned about committing similar violations.

On September 20, 2007, Petru Oltu, the Orthodox priest in the village of Harbovet, assaulted Jehovah's Witnesses Iulia Vizii and Aliona Raiu. He threatened them with violence and death because of their speaking about their religion and forcibly brought them to the mayor's office. On October 17, 2007, a complaint was submitted to the Anenii Noi Regional Police Station. On January 9, 2008, a petition was submitted to the Anenii Noi Regional Prosecutor. On February 12, 2008, the Anenii Noi Police Station stated that the facts contained in the complaint could not be confirmed. On March 21, 2008, another complaint was submitted to the Anenii Noi Regional Prosecutor. On April 29, 2008, the Anenii Noi Regional Prosecutor stated that the facts had been partially confirmed but that there was no basis for criminal charges. On May 22, 2008, a complaint was submitted to the Prosecutor General Office. On June 30, 2008, the Anenii Noi Regional Prosecutor noted that no violations had been discovered and that the complaint would not be reexamined.

On November 17, 2007, Stepan Sarbu, mayor of the village of Taraclia, assaulted Jehovah's Witnesses Zinaida Tabacari and Ana Verenjac. Sarbu forbade them to talk to local residents about their faith and threatened to gather a mob to assault them. On December 24, 2007, Zinaida Tabacari and Ana Verenjac reported the incident to the Causeni Regional Police Station. Police rejected the complaint, stating that the mayor's actions were covered neither by the criminal nor by the administrative legislation. On April 29, 2008, a complaint was filed with the Causeni Regional Prosecutor. On August 7, 2008, the prosecutor rejected the complaint, stating it had no basis for a criminal investigation.

On September 29, 2007, Ilie Bulduratu, mayor of Susleni, assaulted Jehovah's Witnesses Andrei Negru and Ion Perlog and threatened them with death if they were to return to the village and speak to others about their religion. On October 30, 2007, a complaint was submitted to the Orhei Regional Police Station. On January 9, 2008, a complaint was submitted to the Orhei Regional Prosecutor. On February 27, 2008, the Orhei Police Station communicated that the facts contained in the complaint were not true. On March 21, 2008, another complaint was submitted to the Orhei Regional Prosecutor. No further developments have been registered.

On November 9, 2007, Mihail Ciobanu, the Orthodox priest in the village of Carpesti, verbally attacked Jehovah's Witnesses Timotei and Natalia Onofrei. Ciobanu threatened them with violence, told them to produce authorization to carry out their activities, and warned them to leave the village or face a mob that would be gathered to oppose them. On December 7, 2007, a complaint was submitted to the Cantemir

Region Police Station. On April 3, 2008, a complaint was submitted to the Cantemir Regional Prosecutor. On May 29, 2008, the Cantemir Regional Police Station stated that the facts had been partially confirmed, and Ciobanu received an official warning about his conduct.

On December 3, 2007, Toma Lungu, the Orthodox priest in the village of Puhaceni, shoved Jehovah's Witnesses Sergiu Pavalache and Petru Ipate in the street. He then insulted the two and threatened them with violence if they did not leave the village and stop talking to residents about their religion. On December 24, 2007, a complaint was submitted to the Anenii Noi Regional Police Station. On January 18, 2008, the Anenii Noi Regional Police Station stated that Toma Lungu had been officially warned about committing any similar violations.

On February 15, 2009, Jehovah's Witnesses Banari Vitalie and Tomita Ion were assaulted by Simeon Onofrei, mayor of the village of Zaicana (Criuleni), who prohibited their activity and threatened them with violence if they did not immediately leave the village. On March 9, 2009, a complaint was filed with the Criuleni Regional Police Station.

On July 3, 2008, Tacu Constantin and Tudor Burac were prohibited from carrying out their activity in the village of Copanca (Causeni). Council member Iliev Mihail explained that the Copanca Village Council had adopted a decision to prohibit the activity of other religions in the village. On October 1, 2008, the Causeni Regional Prosecutor decided that local officials had not prohibited the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses and therefore were not subject to criminal proceedings.

On November 29, 2008, Jehovah's Witnesses Natalia Croitor and Oxana Verhovetchi were stopped by the mayor of village Copanca (Causeni rayon), who prohibited their activity and explained that 2,000 signatures had been gathered by those who opposed the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses. On December 24, 2008, a complaint was submitted to the Causeni regional prosecutor requesting administrative proceedings against the Mayor of the village for obstructing the activities of a religious organization. On March 24, 2009, the prosecutor rejected the complaint. On April 1, 2009, a complaint was submitted to the Causeni Regional Court requesting that the prosecutor's order be annulled. On May 5, 2009, the Causeni Regional Court annulled the prosecutor's order and accepted further examination of the complaint. No further developments have been reported.

On July 9, 2008, Jehovah's Witnesses Alexandra Machedonschi and Olesea Lisac were assaulted on a public street in Chisinau by Gavrilita Severin, an Orthodox priest who destroyed their religious publications and spoke against the Jehovah's Witnesses. Severin was also reported to have assaulted Jehovah's Witnesses Oleg Vrinceanu and Sergiu Pintili on August 20, 2008 and Nina Fedorenco on September 26, 2008. Local police were informed. No further developments were reported.

On January 2, 2009, Jehovah's Witnesses Angela Gherasim and Liliana Petrascu were verbally assaulted by Orthodox priest Iulian Rata in the village of Lucaseuca, who obstructed their activity and declared that he was authorized to destroy the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses. A complaint to the local prosecutor and regional court were dismissed.

On February 6, 2009, Jehovah's Witnesses Olga Spac and Alina Tiganas were assaulted in the village of Tudoraby a group of people who intimidated them with firearms, and threatened them with violence if they continued their activity in the village. Local police responded to the Jehovah's Witnesses' complaints by closing the case on the grounds that no criminal or administrative violations had occurred.

On November 2, 2008, Jehovah's Witnesses Veaceslav Laba and Iosif Ivanov were assaulted by Orthodox priest Ion Lunic in the village of Bardar, along with a group of about 30 people, who insulted them, threatened them with the destruction of their property, and prohibited them from entering the village to carry out their religious activity. The Ialoveni regional prosecutor rejected complaints by the Jehovah's Witnesses, but on March 27, 2009, the Ialoveni Regional Court overrode the Ialoveni regional prosecutor's decision and ordered re-examination of the complaint.

On March 29, 2009, Jehovah's Witnesses Andrei Cius and Denis Reabaconi were assaulted by Lunic Ioana, wife of the Orthodox priest of the village of Bardar, along with a group of three persons, who insulted them, threatened them with violence, and prohibited them from entering the village to carry out their religious activity. On April 17, 2009, a complaint was submitted to the Ialoveni regional prosecutor.

On December 22, 2008, Orthodox priest Veaceslav Maxim verbally assaulted Galina Duluta and Mariana Dontu, who were preaching publicly in the village of Taraclia de Salcie, and threatened them with death. On January 12, 2009, Maxim shoved Galina Duluta to the ground, grabbed her hair and dragged her around. He then doused her with water and insulted her with obscene language. Following this attack Duluta was unable to stand up because of pain in her leg. After complaints, Maxim was summoned to the police office and in the presence of the authorities he continued to shout at the Jehovah's Witnesses. On January 22, 2009, the Cahul City Court examined the case of abuse and found Maxim guilty of "simple hooliganism" and fined him \$20 (200 Moldovan lei).

In contrast with the previous year, the BOC reported no cases of police checks of congregants at religious services or of religious leaders in their offices. In the summer of 2008, the Labor Inspectorate carried out checks at BOC offices at the request of Vladimir Turcanu, at that time Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Legal Issues, Appointments and Immunities. Turcanu made his request on the basis of allegations that Christian Democratic Party Member of Parliament Vlad Cubreacov was a BOC employee.

On December 26, 2007, BOC Metropolitan Petru Paduraru, who holds a Romanian diplomatic passport, was held for two hours at a land border crossing from Romania, searched, and asked to sign a statement that he was carrying no drugs.

Following President Voronin's December 2007 criticisms of the BOC, the BOC reported that soon afterward, police or other security officers visited most of its priests at home or in church and warned them that they could be punished for "Romanian heresies." Authorities also reportedly told BOC priests that leaving the BOC for the MOC would bring many advantages.

Police and other security and immigration officials continued occasionally to check the identities of Muslim worshippers leaving Friday prayers, made video recordings of worshippers, and requested that they visit police headquarters to explain their activities. A spokesman for the Islamic League for Preaching and Guidance said that attendance at worship has dropped considerably as a result of perceived intimidation. The spokesman also noted that authorities have refused to allocate separate sections in cemeteries for Muslim burials, and require that Muslims buy two plots in regular cemeteries so that the body can be oriented towards the Kaaba, as opposed to the east-west orientation used in Orthodox graveyards. Authorities do not permit Muslim women to be photographed in headscarves for official documents such as national IDs and passports. Several Muslim women were told by officials that they should leave the country, even though they were Moldovan citizens. Other Muslim worshippers reported being roughed up by police on their way to worship.

The pastor of the Full Gospel Church of Christ the Savior, registered in 1995, complained of constant checks of documents and worshippers by Transnistrian authorities.

On December 4, 2007, Transnistrian authorities fined an independent Baptist pastor \$6.60 (55 Transnistrian rubles) for refusing to allow court executors into his home to seize property to pay previous fines levied for his failure to register his church.

On October 8, 2007, Transnistrian State Security Ministry officers arrested several members of the Protestant New Life Mission as they were preparing to distribute copies of a Christian magazine outside Tiraspol's Shevchenko University. Officials seized 800 copies of the magazine and confiscated the car of the New Life Mission leader, who was later fined \$139 (1,167 Transnistrian rubles) for bringing contraband literature into the area. On October 17, officials returned the car but refused to return the magazines.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

### **Forced Religious Conversion**

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

### **Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom**

In April 2008 the Chisinau Appeals Court ruled in favor of Jehovah's Witnesses who filed a March 2008 complaint regarding missionaries who had been refused work permits. Following the ruling, all missionaries received work permits.

On February 9, 2009, the Permanent Governmental Commission established five months earlier to implement ECHR decisions urged the Government to implement all ECHR decisions made in favor of the BOC. No progress had been made on implementation. The Commission also requested the Ministry of Interior, Prosecutor General, and Supreme Court of Justice to prevent the expulsion of foreign religious workers who hold public activities without first informing the local mayor's office. No individuals have been arrested or charged for such activities since the request was made.

On February 2, 2009, the Ministry of Justice added two new courses, dedicated to religious freedom, to training programs of the National Institute of Justice, and instituted related seminars in the first semester of 2009.

Following a July 1, 2008, roundtable discussion, supported by the U.N. Development Program, between the Government and religious groups, the Government published on the MOJ website a guide to the laws and regulations that govern registration of religious groups and their component parts. The 49-page guide includes specific examples of the sorts of documents that are supposed to be submitted.

## **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

On March 1, 2009, vandals broke into the Bender synagogue in the Transnistrian region and painted neo-Nazi graffiti on the walls. They desecrated the Torah scroll, stole silver religious objects, and burned posters. Police were investigating the crime as an incident of hooliganism. The Jewish community is seeking full

restitution of the property, and some NGOs have speculated that the vandalism could be a form of harassment connected to the case. At the end of the reporting period there had been no further developments.

Some Muslim women reported that they were mocked at school and at work for wearing headscarves. Some reported that university professors arbitrarily failed them in examinations.

The dispute between the Moldovan and the Bessarabian Orthodox Churches continued.

## **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Embassy raised concerns at the highest levels of the Government regarding the persistent registration difficulties of some religious groups and requested that registration procedures be clarified and simplified.

From January 10 to February 1, 2009, four Moldovan religious leaders, representing the BOC, two Protestant churches, and the Baha'i Faith, toured the United States under the sponsorship of the U.S. Government. The group met with religious and secular groups in the United States, and examined the role played by religious groups in the United States, interconfessional cooperation, and religious freedom.

In February 2009 the U.S. Ambassador held a third annual reception in honor of religious freedom, hosting representatives of registered and unregistered religious organizations, including representatives of the BOC, two Islamic groups, the Unification Church, a Chisinau synagogue, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Lutheran Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Baptist Church, an evangelical seminary, and the Baha'i Faith. For the second year in a row, no governmental representative attended. The Ambassador encouraged participants to continue their efforts to promote religious freedom and harmony.

Embassy representatives continued to support the registration of religious groups and the registration and residency permits of foreign religious workers throughout the country